

Postmodernism, the Subject, and the Real in John Adams's *Nixon in China*

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In her book *A Poetics of Modernism*, Linda Hutcheon inscribes postmodernism within a paradox:

Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning. And, in art, it does so by leaving overt the contradictions between its self-reflexivity and its historical grounding. In theory . . . the contradictions are not always . . . overt, but are often implied—as in the Barthesian anti-authorizing authority or the Lyotardian master-narrativizing of our suspicion of master narratives. These paradoxes are, I believe, what has led to the political ambidexterity of postmodernism in general, for it has been celebrated and decried by both ends of the political spectrum. If you ignore half of the contradiction, however, it becomes quite easy to see the postmodern as either neoconservatively nostalgic/ reactionary or radically disruptive/revolutionary. I would argue that we must beware of this suppression of the full complexity of postmodernist paradoxes. (xii-xiii)

When I first heard *Nixon in China*, I was attracted by the music, repelled by the suspicion that the geo-political exploits of the United

impression, both elements of my initial reaction have become stronger, and I will explore the theoretical implications of them here using Hutcheon's notion of postmodernism's necessary paradox as a guide. I am assuming then that this piece is both complicit with and resistant to a glorification of the American geo-political enterprise. There is evidence on both sides of the complicity/resistance axis in the libretto, the music, and our position as listening subjects. My remarks on *Nixon in China* will open a theoretical space (at once in the music, in our ears as listeners, and in phenomenal reality) that can best be described psychoanalytically using the concept of the Real from Lacan and writers such as Kaja Silverman and Slavoj Žižek.

The Libretto of *Nixon in China*

The libretto was written by Alice Goodman; it is an imagined reconstruction of comments, dialogue, and speeches given by Nixon, Kissinger, Pat Nixon, Mao, etc. as reported in newspaper and television broadcasts during Nixon's visit to China in 1972. In addition, Alice Goodman read Chinese literature and articles appearing in Chinese newspapers to acquire a sense both of what the Chinese might have said to the Nixons and how such language might have been infused with imagery from their respective literary canons. On the surface at least this is epic material to be sure: east meets west, communism meets capitalism, Mao and Nixon shake hands.

There are three Acts divided into fewer and fewer scenes per Act: Act I has three scenes, Act II, two, and Act III, one. Such a narrowing down might suggest a narrative structure that moves diachronically to an end which endows meaning retrospectively on what has gone on before. But the libretto undercuts such a linear narrative. There is no big number at the end of the opera; there is no climax to the plot, no joint declaration is reached or delivered, no conflict erupts to irrevocably mark the meeting as either a triumph or disaster for either side. There is a hint of a correspondence between the beginning and end of the libretto; the toasting scene in Act I corresponds to the final scene in which Mao and Chiang dance while Nixon and Pat

reminisce about their past. But the final scene reads like an imploded version of the toasting scene; all the principals *are* on stage, but while the first scene presents them in a unified gesture of toasting, the final scene has each pair of principals (Mao/Chiang and Nixon/Pat) drifting off into their own thoughts.

High modernist librettos often end open-ended; Berg's adaptation of Georg Buechner's *Woyzeck* is an example. Berg ends his opera with a child (whose parents have been killed) alone on stage playing on a hobby horse. And although the linearity of the opera is undercut through the tableau quality of the action, there is a rising tension, a climax and a denouement. The libretto of *Nixon in China* is paratactic, two-dimensional, a space (necessarily presented as a linear series of events) upon which diverse elements are placed side-by-side.¹

¹An overview of the scenes suggests how the libretto cuts against the grain of an apparent linearity. This overview is taken from the CD liner notes, 21-25.

ACT I: Scene 1—The airfield outside Peking: it is a cold, clear, dry morning: Monday, February 21, 1972. Contingents of army, navy and air force circle the field and sing "The Three Main Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points of Attention." Premier Chou En-lai, accompanied by a small group of officials, strolls onto the runway just as The Spirit of 76 taxis into view. President Nixon disembarks. They shake hands and the President sings of his excitement and his fears.

Scene 2—An hour later he is meeting with Chairman Mao. Mao's conversational armory contains philosophical apothegms, unexpected political observations, and gnomic jokes, and everything he sings is amplified by his secretaries and the Premier. It is not easy for a Westerner to hold his own in such a dialogue.

Scene 3—After the audience with Mao, everyone at the first evening's banquet is euphoric. The President and Mrs. Nixon manage to exchange a few words before Premier Chou rises to make the first of the evening's toasts, a tribute to patriotic fraternity. The President replies, toasting the Chinese people and the hope of peace. The toasts continue, with less formality, as the night goes on.

ACT II: Scene 1—Snow has fallen during the night. In the morning Mrs. Nixon is ushered onstage by her party of guides and journalists. She explains a little of what it feels like for a woman like her to be First Lady, and accepts a glass elephant from the workers at the Peking Glass Factory. She visits the Evergreen People's Commune and

Linear connection is undermined within scenes, too; characters often talk past one another, cut one another off, repeat themselves, ignore what is being said to them. One example is from Act I scene 1, in which Nixon has just landed and begins immediately to meditate on the epic nature of his role in history while ignoring Chou En-lai's attempt to carry their initial exchange further.²

This is language failing at the most elementary level and it pervades the libretto of the opera. Language failure is common in comedy as a sign of arbitrary social relations; in Ibsen and Chekhov, paratactic juxtaposition of lines as characters talk past one another is a symptom of the isolation of the modern individual. In Beckett, language is nearly removed entirely from its communicating function. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett's language while stripped of conventional exchange

the Summer Palace, where she pauses in the Gate of Longevity and Goodwill to sing "This is prophetic!". Then, on to the Ming Tombs before sunset.

Scene 2—In the evening, the Nixon's attend a performance of *The Red Detachment of Women*, a revolutionary ballet devised by Mao's wife, Chiang Ch'ing. The ballet entwines ideological rectitude with Hollywood-style emotion. The Nixons respond to the latter; they are drawn to the downtrodden peasant girl—in fact, they are drawn into the action on the side of simple virtue. Chiang Ch'ing sings "I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung," ending with full choral backing.

Act III—The last night in Peking.

²Chou: May I—

Nixon: Though we spoke quietly
The eyes and ears of history
Caught every gesture—

Chou: —introduce—

Nixon: And every word, transforming us
As we, transfixed—

Chou: —the Deputy
Minister of Security.

Nixon: Made History. (*Nixon* 31 libretto)

value as vehicle of information, coheres as a monument on another level. Repetition of words, phrases, groups of lines, and even acts make a transcendent meaning emerge from what seems on the surface a barren linguistic landscape. In the libretto of *Nixon in China* there is no transcendent structure in the effacement of the linearity of language.

All the elements of epic characters and epic drama are in the libretto; they have been arranged, however, in a sequence that denies rising tension to a climax, that undercuts language's function as communication. The question for the role of music in setting such a libretto is this: how will the music carry both the epic implications of the material, as well as the effacement of linearity in the libretto?³

The Music of *Nixon in China*

On the most immediate and visceral level, the music of the opera captures Hutcheon's sense of postmodernism's paradox. The music "goes nowhere"; triadic harmonies, dominant seventh chords, atonal tone clusters, etc. pervade the music, but never as elements of one compositional principle. And yet the music also asserts the illusion of forward motion through incessantly reiterated rhythmic values and dynamics (crescendo and diminuendo that might suggest left-to-right diachronic motion). The opera is at once an expansive, continuous spectacle and a static, discontinuous pastiche.⁴

³One crucial element in a discussion of an opera's complicity with/resistance to ideology must be bracketed-off from the present discussion—staging. I have not seen a production of the opera and would like therefore to restrict my comments to the libretto and a piano-vocal score of the opera from which musical examples are taken. Let me thank Boosey and Hawkes for their generosity and patience in providing me with a piano/vocal score to *Nixon in China*.

⁴For an elaboration of how pastiche works in postmodern art, see Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" in *The Anti-Aesthetic*. Jameson suggests that pastiche is a spatial representation peculiar to postmodern painting, schizophrenia—a temporal representation peculiar to postmodern poetry. My use of the term pastiche to

It is in part the orchestration that carries the monumental weight of this music. Instruments play in that part of their registers in which they sound “the best” (with the exception of comic effects such as very high vocal falsettos); orchestral colors complement each other so that in loud sections, brass, strings, and winds blend beautifully. The spacing of chords generally reflects the principles of spacing in the overtone series—wide intervals at the bottom, narrow intervals at the top.⁵ The singers as well generally sing lines that outline triads, move stepwise, and build gradually to high notes.

There are arias,⁶ duets,⁷ small ensemble numbers,⁸ large

describe Adams’s music is provisional at this point in the discussion. I will argue that Adams’s music creates a paradoxical impression of fragmentation and fusion at the same time; pastiche suggests the former category of juxtaposition, fragmentation, side-by-sideness.

⁵There are exceptions to this, however; in the “rat music” to be discussed below, the crisp, punctuating chords in the orchestra sound Stravinskiesque—like the E minor chords in the *Symphony of Psalms*, with triadic spacing in both low and high registers (Act I sc. 1).

⁶Pat’s aria from Act II scene 1 is the clearest evocation of the epic grandeur in the opera (mm. 420-598). As all the principals in the work, she sings of the public and the private as if there were no distinction between the two. Her private space is heavily mediated, however, in the libretto. Not only is she the wife of an epic figure, her most personal memories are often from popular culture: “Let Gypsy Rose kick off her high-heeled shoes” (Act II scene 1, mm. 477-481).

⁷See Chiang’s vocal lines in Act III scene 1. As she and Mao sing a duet recalling their common histories, Chiang sings lines that gradually rise and fall, allowing the voice to span its entire register gradually.

⁸In Act I scene 2, Mao sings what is essentially an aria, but his words are echoed/commented upon by three female voices. After Mao sings “I can’t talk very well” the voices repeat the line in longer note values both musically rendering the sense of inability in the libretto and, at the same time, distorting the clarity of our ability to hear and understand Mao. The listener thus shares for an instant the temporal distortion that Nixon is hearing as he begins to converse with Mao for the first time in the opera.

ensemble numbers,⁹ instrumental interludes, moments of word-painting,¹⁰ all of which locate the material within the western European tradition of opera. These are the elements that “pull” us into the opera; they are the tools of its complicity in glorifying the epic potential of the libretto.

While Adams’s musical materials are familiar, however, they are denied any single compositional cohesion in the piece as a whole; this familiarity/lack of predictability makes the music sound uncanny.¹¹ This uncanny effect is evident in the first thing we hear in the opera—repeated ascending A natural minor scales (they can also be heard modally as aeolian scales). The material of a binary opposition between the key of A minor and its dominant *is* present, but a dialectical tension is undercut. E♭’s that might sound like dominants in the bass do *not* in their high register here. These measures present pure basic material stripped of any illusion of depth (see Example 1).

The opening measures are marked by a paradoxical detail; the middle staff presents a completely predictable and regular pattern of

⁹See Act I scene 3 for the toasting music in which Chinese “Gambei” and “Cheers” alternate paratactically with intimate fragments—at times personal, at times public—among the principals.

¹⁰Just one example among many: In Act I scene 1, the music literally skips a beat as Nixon sings “The nation’s heartland skips a beat” (mm. 697-700).

¹¹I am using the term “uncanny” in Freud’s sense as developed in his essay from 1919 “The Uncanny.” Freud refers to literary representations of the odd, the horrifying, the fanciful as images of a state of mind in which what was once familiar becomes unfamiliar; this is the essential dynamic of the uncanny. Freud discusses the uncanny *not* in terms of a binary opposition between the comfortable, familiar world “inside” (the mind, the home, society, etc.) and a threatening, external, evil force. Rather the uncanny seems to emerge out of what had been familiar. Freud discovers this dynamic within the etymology of the word *heimlich* (familiar, in German). Freud realized that the word first meant “familiar,” “trusted,” and slowly acquired additional connotations of “secret,” “hidden.”

Adams’s music is thus uncanny as musical text since it presents the experienced Western ear with familiar elements of our musical tradition that become forged in an unfamiliar way. In Freud, the uncanny reminds us of origins; in Adams, the uncanny distances the listener from the epic grandeur of the opera’s subject matter.

Example 1. Act I scene 1, mm 1-30

NIXON IN CHINA

PIANO-VOCAL SCORE

JOHN ADAMS
libretto: ALICE GOODMANACT I, SCENE 1

SCENE 2: PAGE 52 / SCENE 3: PAGE 131

Handwritten musical score for Nixon in China, Act I, Scene 1, measures 1-30. The score is written on three systems of grand staves. The first system is marked with a circled '1' and includes handwritten notes 'd:54', 'L.H.', and 'B.H.'. The second system is marked with a circled '6'. The third system is marked with a circled '11'. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. At the bottom right of the third system, there is a handwritten note '(end empty)'.

Example 1, continued

The image displays three systems of musical notation for piano accompaniment, numbered 16, 21, and 26. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble and bass clef. The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The first system (16) shows a melodic line in the treble and a rhythmic accompaniment in the bass. The second system (21) continues the melodic and rhythmic patterns. The third system (26) shows a more complex melodic line with some rests and a corresponding bass accompaniment. The notation is written in a standard musical style with clear staff lines and note heads.

ascending A natural-minor scales. Stasis is reinforced through contour: they rise over and over again. The high E \flat 's and pitches in the bass (A \flat , F \flat , C \flat) enter at irregular metric intervals.¹²

Cycles of major thirds often seem like structural markers in the opera. There are augmented triads at both specific places in the music, and "unfolded" over larger units in the bass. But these correspondences are not consistently handled across entire scenes, among scenes, or among the acts. Major thirds seem to mark large-scale structure from mm. 1-158 with F \flat , A \flat , and C \sharp /D \flat 's punctuating the bass line. The first scene as a whole, however, begins with A and ends with G—negating the cycle of thirds as sole structural element of the scene.¹³

In Nixon's "News has a kind of mystery" aria, A \flat major chords are juxtaposed to C major chords. The chromatic mediant sonority is startling when, after 35 measures of A \flat major, a C major chord occurs on "listening" in m. 409 (see Example 2). The effect is striking and comical as the libretto shows Nixon ignoring Chou-En lai. An E major chord sounds in measures 415-416 (not shown in the Example), and the music seems to be unfolding a cycle of major thirds in the aria. But in m. 417 the music stresses F minor, thus negating the unfolding major thirds.

Most major-minor 7th chords in the piece do not "resolve," (such as the E major/minor 7th chord at the end of Act I scene 2); there are exceptions, however, such as the following passage from Act

¹²C \flat gives way to C \sharp /D \flat in the measures that follow Example 1. Thus what seems to be an unfolding of an F-major triad in the bass from mm. 1-30 becomes a cycle of major thirds: A \flat , F \flat , C \sharp /D \flat , as will be discussed below.

¹³Here the familiar harmonic procedure is directional tonality (see Robert Bailey and Patrick McCreless). I use the preposition "with" to suggest Adams's two-dimensional tonal surface; "in" suggests that a surface key relates structurally to submerged basic material. The logic of the three-dimensional metaphor for diatonic tonal material is this link between surface manifestation and latent content; what makes a connection between surface and depth possible in diatonic tonal music is a connection between moments perceived as present linked retentively or protentively to other moments. These links are severed in *Nixon in China*, producing a "flat" surface of pure moments.

III scene 1, in which an E major/minor 7th chord with added fourth “resolves” to A minor (see Example 3).

Example 2. Act I scene 2, mm. 405-413

NIXON
CHOU EN-LAI ON THIS BARE FIELD OUT - SIDE PE-KING - JUST NOW, THE WHOLE WORLD WAS

(405)

NIXON
LS - TEN-ING. THE WHOLE WORLD WAS LS - TEN-ING. LS - TEN-ING.

CHOU
MAY I -- MAY I --

(409)

Example 3. Act III, scene 1, mm. 597-602

(597)

(led)

(1st)

(led)

There are passages that sound like static harmony loops beginning and ending with the same sonority filled-in by semitonal voice-leading as in Chiang's aria from Act III scene 1. This music seems to unfold a major third span from E \flat down to C \flat , but the music then turns to a cycle of major thirds (see Example 4). Semitonal voice-leading also moves the music from one key to another on a more local level in Act I scene 1.¹⁴ This is a crucial moment in the opera; after an initial choral number introducing the action to come, the music contains a veiled cross-reference to the opening of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, thus inscribing the work within the epic tradition of German romantic opera. While Wagner prolongs an E \flat major chord diatonically at the outset of *Rheingold*, Adams projects C major across his two-dimensional tonal surface. Both Adams and Wagner superimpose an ascending arpeggiation of a major triad in dotted rhythm over a static arpeggiation of the same chord in the bass. Both set the stage as well for vocal entries in their respective operas.¹⁵ (See Example 5.)

The work can suggest diachronic connection, as musical material latent at one moment becomes manifest at a moment that follows. In Act I scene 1 Nixon begins to construct a mythic view of America that will continue throughout the opera as his main vehicle for (self-reflexive) expression. He juxtaposes precise bits of images of American daily life with abstractions on the nature of America in an almost Whitmanesque fashion. As Nixon sings "a car roars past playing loud pop . . . is gone," an F \sharp minor chord occurs (see Example 6).

This F \sharp minor sonority emerges again just a few measures later as Nixon's euphoria implodes into a paranoid vision of rats chewing

¹⁴For a discussion of traditional theories of semitonal voice-leading, see Robert Bailey's essay on *Tristan*.

¹⁵My thanks to Patrick McCreless for pointing out that the Wagner quote at the outset of *Nixon* is more resonant still. McCreless suggests that Wagner was interested in beginning *The Ring* with a musical evocation of the root-syllable of nature. Thus these pieces share a concern with sound as origin of consciousness: for Wagner, the root-syllable is the source of meaning in the human body. See Richard Wagner, *Opera as Drama*, Part III Chapter 2, "The Sounding Vowel of Speech and Its Rise to Musical Tone."

Example 4. Act III scene 1, mm. 601-654 (reduction)

Handwritten musical score for Example 4, Act III scene 1, mm. 601-654 (reduction). The score is a single staff with various notes and accidentals. Above the staff, measures are numbered: 601, 617, 624, 634, 641, 646, 648, 649, 650, 651, 652, 653, 654. Below the staff, there are handwritten notes: "A F Db A Db A" and "cycle of thirds".

Example 5. Act I scene 1 mm. 297-309

Handwritten musical score for Example 5, Act I scene 1, mm. 297-309. The score is a piano reduction with four systems of staves. The first system starts at measure 297 and ends at 300. The second system starts at measure 301 and ends at 304. The third system starts at measure 305 and ends at 308. The fourth system starts at measure 309 and ends at 312. The notation includes various notes, rests, and accidentals. There are also some handwritten annotations like "sempre f" and "Sm."

Example 6. Act I scene 1, mm. 623-633

NIXON

FALL A-SLEEP A CAR ROARS PAST PLAY-ING LOUD POP,

623

624

625

IS GONE.

Example 7. Act I scene 1, mm. 654-661

1:38

NIXON

THE RATS THE RATS THE RATS BE-GIN TO CHEW THE SHEETS. THE

654

655

656

MALE CHORUS

THE RATS BE-GIN TO CHEW THE SHEETS.

SPOKEN AT RANDOM BY EACH INDIVIDUAL IN A LOW, VERY SOFT VOICE WITH A SLIGHT PAUSE BETWEEN EACH REPETITION.

sheets in the bowels of a ship (see Example 7). This emergence of F# minor is certainly no organic unfolding; when the sonority first associated with epic vision of American goodness comes back for the paranoid rat music the effect is uncanny—a nightmarish repetition, as if there were something within Nixon's thoughts on American goodness that contained the seeds of its own implosion.

Superimposed familiar sonorities can represent peaceful moments in the libretto, as in Act I scene 2. Kissinger says to Mao that his regime will last 1000 years. The phrase "1000 years" is repeated over and over by Nixon, Kissinger, Chou, and three female voices to a static harmony of a perfect fifth in the bass and a triadic chord a step away (Example 8).

Example 8. Act I scene 2, mm. 363-426 (reduction)

And yet at other moments superimposed sonorities *propel* the music as in the transition from Act I Scene 1 to Act I Scene 2. (Example 9). Here, the G/D fifth gains first a Bb third scale degree, after which Bb and Bb clash. The effect suggests that it is the filling of the perfect fifth here that creates the forward drive of the music.

The music in Act I scene 3, at the toasting ceremony ("Gambei"), presents an alternation between E minor and G minor as the parties toast one another; as they drink, a Bb/Db third in the bass seems to paradoxically set-off the E minor and G minor music as if in a frame, and to weld both sections, alternating E minor and G minor together through the tritones (E minor + Bb/G minor + Db). (See Example 10.)

Example 9. Act I scene 1, mm. 743-754 to Act I, scene 2 mm. 1-5

MIXON IN CHINA

52.

ACT I/2

IN CHAIRMAN MAO'S STUDY

1

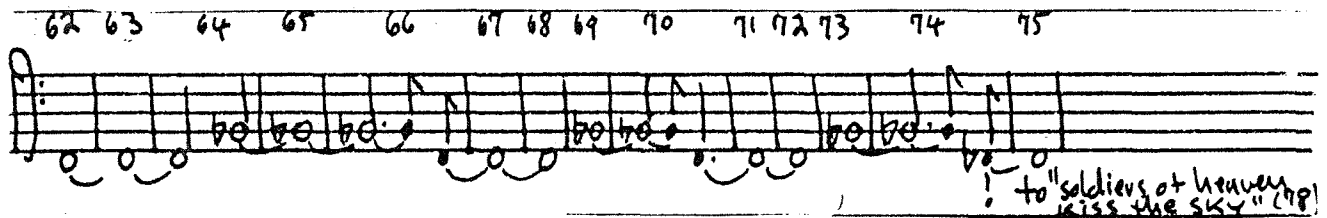
* led

Example 10. Act I scene 3, mm. 213-235 (reduction)

213 214 223 227 229 230 231 232 233 234 235

There are very striking conventional linear gestures, such as a Meyeresque structural gap in Act I scene 1 that announces forward motion.¹⁶ The introductory music is drawing to a close and a perfect fourth in the bass expands to a tritone to announce the first entry of voices in the opera (see Example 11).

Example 11. Act I scene 1, mm. 62-75 (reduction)



Many familiar musical procedures of the Western tradition are present in *Nixon in China*. But these materials sound uncanny through a lack of unifying techniques that link them either to each other as a linear sequence of musical ideas, or to the text as musical representations of the libretto. As mentioned above, the uncanny is an effect produced when something within the familiar emerges to produce a paradoxical effect of familiarity/unfamiliarity at the same time. *Nixon in China* sounds uncanny since each procedure is familiar in isolation (the minor scale, the major-minor 7th chord, chromatic mediant, tritones, superimposition of keys, structural gaps that get opened and closed, etc.)

But through the continuous texture of eighth-notes (or sixteenth-notes) the music seems to be borne by an inscrutable, oceanic one-ness. What gives this music its sense of the uncanny is a fantasy of return back to a primal state in which we were at one with the world. Kaja Silverman calls this the “sonorous envelope”—a fantasy of being bathed in the sounds of the mother’s voice from which one has not yet split.¹⁷ The opera represents an intensely paradoxical relationship

¹⁶For a discussion of structural gaps, see Meyer’s *Emotion and Meaning in Music*.

¹⁷For a discussion of the sonorous envelope and how it works in both Lacanian psychoanalysis and in the sound tracks of classic cinema, see Kaja Silverman’s *The Acoustic Mirror*.

between public, epic subject matter, on the one hand, and a private fantasy of regression, on the other. The musical vehicles for this fantasy are rhythm and dynamics.

There are moments of sudden change in dynamic level in the opera, but crescendo and diminuendo dominate—suggesting a fantasy of linear connection stripped of any conventional significance. Since there is no clear rise, climax, and fall of tension in the libretto, and there is the paradox of familiar procedures/uncanny *uses* of such procedures in the music, the dynamics sound completely arbitrary. And yet dynamics are not random. Big ensemble numbers tend to be loud; there is an alternation between sections that are loud and quiet; this seems as “organic” as the vocal lines that let the singers gradually ascend to high notes. What do dynamics express if not harmony, rhythm, or text?

Since this is music of pure moments merged in an unmotivated and arbitrary continuum, dynamics produce a unique listener’s space. It is trivial to point out that the volume of the music is the one parameter left to the listener’s control. Since moments have so systematically been stripped of their connecting function and since there is nevertheless such an acoustic impression of connection through dynamics and continuous texture, the listener has the illusion of hearing pure attribute without reference to an entity. It is as if we were able to conceptualize pure adverbial function without a verb. A pure listening space is opened through an impression of meaning that cannot be applied to an external referent. But how does such a listening space reflect the issue at hand of the complicit representation of epic subject matter in postmodern art?

Nixon in China and the Subject

In discussing a general theory of how ideology and subjectivity function, Althusser claims that western individuals are so completely inscribed in ideological structures that we are always already subjects. On the street someone says “Hey you!”; you turn around recognizing the rightness of the other’s call, and reflect back to him an affirming

return glance. Althusser stresses the mirror-like nature of the subject who returns the other's glance as a key element in one's inscription into subjectivity. Althusser calls this hailing of the subject "interpellation"—a process in which the individual becomes a subject by a performative act linking his being (subject with a small "s") to a larger social order (Subject with a large "S"). But Althusser also argues that interpolation involves misrecognition as well—that the subject (the individual who becomes a subject with a small "s") feels himself reflected by larger ideological structures in culture (the Subject with a large "S") while ignoring the function of hailing: "the reproduction of the relations of production and of the relations deriving from them" (Althusser 183).

Interpolation thus involves both recognition (I turn to acknowledge my name having been rightly called; I am inscribed as a subject of a Subject), and misrecognition: I ignore the fact that (a) I am always already a subject of the Subject since interpolation activates structures that pre-date the *moment* of hailing, and (b) I occupy a subordinate position as subject with a small "s" of the Subject with a large "S".

The prevalence of national anthems among Western nations suggests that music plays a prominent role in inscribing subjects within ideological systems. While Althusser's quintessential hailing on the street is directed at one individual who reflects back a recognition/misrecognition to the subject, listening to a national anthem shifts the terms of this dynamic while keeping its essential paradoxical nature. When we hear our national anthem, our listening inscribes us in ideology, (1) through our recognition of the anthems's melodic and harmonic structure, (2) through recognition of music's iconic representation of the lyrics, and (3) through an absence of any detail that would alienate or blur the clarity of either of these perceptions. These are the components of recognition in musical interpolation.

Misrecognition occurs as we are paradoxically filled with, yet emptied by, the sounds we are hearing. Our subjectivity is always already at hand (we are born into a state in which its anthem commonly inscribes its subjects); music fills up our bodies with sound. And yet, we are silent vessels for sounds that emanate from the Subject "out

there.”¹⁸ Musical interpolation inscribes me, for example, as an American subject when I listen to “The Star-Spangled Banner.” I recognize the music, process its iconic representation of victory in battle against the British suggested by the melody that stresses partials 4-8 of the overtone series (bugle, call to arms, victory), with no alienating feature to get in the way of my immediate and complete bond between subject (me being filled and emptied by the music) and Subject (the source “out there”).¹⁹

These elements produce listening subjectivity in which music is both *internal* (I recognize and respond to the music), and *external* (I am its silent vessel). While *Nixon in China* is obviously parodying Nixon’s epic quest on so many literary and musical levels, the music is powerfully complicit in ideological structures of subject formation.

Several aspects of the opera inhibit identification. Although words are often repeated in vocal music for the purpose of emphasis, or to fill out a musical phrase, certain words are repeated so often in *Nixon in China* that their meaning is stripped away. There are also moments of parody, as in Chiang’s vocal lines, which are extreme versions of melismatic solos (Example 12). In much traditional opera, the soloist will pause on a syllable of a word that is part of a sentence and extend it with embellishments. In Example 12, “ah” is an isolated and unmotivated fragment that might be a syllable of a word but isn’t.

Adams de-mystifies the American principals in particular. In Act II scene 2, Kissinger obscenely conflates eating with the sexual act: “that luscious thigh/That swelling breast/Scented and greased,/A sacrifice/Running with juice/At my caress” (*Nixon* libretto 46). The music renders Kissinger’s foul delight by beginning in B minor and then forgetting the key as Kissinger loses himself in his own

¹⁸This paradox is captured in the “Rifle Prayer” scene of *Full Metal Jacket*, in which a series of shots show the recruits lying in bed in rows. In each shot, one of the principals is at the front of the shot; other recruits move back in the shot like reflections in a double mirror. In each shot the viewer can hear the voices of each principle just barely audible above the “choir” behind him.

¹⁹I am thinking of how inconceivable this process of musical hailing would be with Jimi Hendrix’s version of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

Example 12. Act III scene 1, 473-482

NIXON IN CHINA 31. Act II/1

CHANG CHING AH AH

MAO TAKES, ON-LY CON-FIRM MYTH-O-LO-GY'S E-TER-NAL CHARM;

CHANG CHING AH

MAO LOOK FROM A

CHANG CHING AH

MAO SOME OF SLEEPING REST ITS LAND-SCAPE OF FERS OF THE

meditation.²⁰ Further on in this scene, Kissinger, Nixon, and Pat are watching a play and Pat momentarily forgets the distinction between reality and representation, as she tries to intervene in the flogging of a young girl in the play they are watching. This is a rare self-referential moment in the opera in which a postmodern strategy of conflating “reality and representation” is rendered in the score.

Clearly, an unmediated version of musical interpolation is inconceivable in *Nixon in China*. Musical procedures are familiar in themselves, but connections are so undercut, and the musical texture is such a paradoxical pastiche of moments welded together in a continuous texture, that identification is blocked. Even if one could become a subject through the music (recognize and feel filled/emptied by its sounds) the opera destroys the idea of a single unified Subject with a large “S” that is “out there.” And yet there is an enormous amount of myth-making going on in the opera, particularly in the final scene. Is it not possible to identify with fragments of myth even though a full musical interpolation merging listener as subject of the Subject is denied?

The epic quality of the opera is at once over- and under-determined. Both Nixon and Mao produce histories of their nations in the opera, but these two histories are curiously equated – as if they were two different versions of the same thing. A listener might hear evocative images of America in the music. But moments often become uncanny (as in Nixon’s memory of “a car roars past playing loud pop” revealing his “rat music”), and the equation of American and Chinese history cancel each other out.

The music renders this conflation of American and Chinese histories through a lack of difference between the music that expresses American and Chinese history. In Act III, the two myths come together as if in dialogue. But the effect is one of statement, lack of response, statement, lack of response (Example 13). Two powerful memories are

²⁰One must remember, however, that this example of music rendering an aspect of the libretto is undercut since Adams often has one musical procedure interrupted by another. Recall the “unfolding” of major thirds in Act I scene 1 whose structural significance is effaced by the directional tonality of the scene as a whole.

Example 13. Act III scene 1, mm. 788-796

NIXON IN CHINA

62.

ACT III/1

SOP
DRAWER WITH ALL THE OTHERS

ALTO
ROD IN A FEW MEN TO RIG A STAND

TEN
WE SHOULD GO UNDER GROUND

BASS
WITH ALL THE OTHERS

PIANO
THEY CALLED IT NICK'S SNACK SHACK I FOUND THE
THE
THE

88

90

Example 13, continued

NIXON IN CHINA

63.

ACT II/1

Musical score for Example 13, continued, measures 392-398. The score is written for five staves: PRT (Piano), NIXON, CHANG CHUNG, MAO, and a grand staff (piano accompaniment). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: NIXON: SPELL OF BUR- GERS ON THE GRILL MADE GROWN MEN; CHANG CHUNG: RE - VO - LU - TION; MAO: RE - VO LU - TION. Measure 392 is circled.

Musical score for Example 13, continued, measures 399-405. The score is written for five staves: PRT (Piano), NIXON, CHANG CHUNG, MAO, and a grand staff (piano accompaniment). The key signature is one flat (B-flat). The time signature is 4/4. The lyrics are: PRT: YES, DICK.; NIXON: CRY. NOW BOULAINVILLE WAS A RE-; CHANG CHUNG: THE RE - VO - LU - - - TION MUST; MAO: THE RE - VO - LU - - - TION MUST. Measure 399 is circled. A handwritten note "*led" is written below the grand staff.

superimposed here—Nixon's anecdote from his war service, Mao's memories of the founding of the revolution; each wife is present as each hero's private audience.

The opera either presents a musical vision of myth-making that transcends any specific, actual, mythic vision, or it deconstructs the very process of representing myth. That is, it is precisely in the presence of the Other that Nixon has his vision of America; it is also necessarily in the presence of *his* Other that Mao has his vision. Both myth-makers are curiously deaf in the opera; they express their vision that is a partial product of the presence of the other culture, but they do not listen to the voices of the Other.

And yet each history, each vision has a kind of "thereness" that resists being symbolized by the notion of "canceling out." It is as if each history, each vision were a pure voice—pure speaking not yet with the ability to hear—and pure affirmation. The opera embodies in this lack of negation a musical representation of the unconscious, and Althusser relates the unconscious to the always already nature of ideology: ". . . [that] ideology has no history, can and must . . . be related directly to Freud's proposition that the *unconscious is eternal*, i.e. that it has no history" (Althusser 161).

Although conventional interpolation on the order of listening to the national anthem is inhibited in the opera, the music does suggest a musical representation of pure ideology without history. In *Nixon in China*, the absence of a past is rendered by the listener being trapped in the *present* through familiar musical materials whose connections with one another are constantly severed. *Nixon in China* is at once empty of, and completely saturated by, ideology. It is a musical representation of what makes subjectivity possible; it is also utterly empty of any specific ideological content. The opera is the musical embodiment of this paradox—a fullness of lack. Can such a paradox be described more clearly?

Nixon in China and the Real

The criticism of Kaja Silverman and Slavoj Žižek has focused on

applications of the theories of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan to studies of popular culture in general and film in particular.²¹ Lacan discusses developing subjectivity in terms of two large events—the second absorbing and transforming the first—the Imaginary Order and the Symbolic Order. The Imaginary is the realm of acoustic and visual (pre-linguistic) experience; its quintessential moment is the mirror stage, in which the child begins to make a distinction between itself and an outer world through seeing its image reflected in a mirror (the mother’s face). The Imaginary is governed by the voice of the mother. The Symbolic Order is the world of language, social structures, the word of the Father. It would be simplistic to place music squarely within the Imaginary Order. Music is deeply symbolic; it carries enormous institutional and economic weight in Western culture, and forms and notational schemes are anything but pre-symbolic. Yet music, painting, and film do rely on visual and acoustic representations in ways that can bring out how pre-symbolic events function in specific social and cultural contexts to inscribe us within ideological structures.²²

There is an odd emptiness at the end of *Nixon in China* that can

²¹For an introduction to Lacan’s theory, see Silverman’s *The Subject of Semiotics* on “the Freudian model” and “the Lacanian model.” For applications of Lacanian concepts to film, see Silverman’s chapter on “Suture” in *The Subject of Semiotics*, and her *Acoustic Mirror*. See also Slavoj Žižek’s *Looking Awry* for detailed Lacanian analyses of Hitchcock films. The study that explicitly links Lacan to music is *The Acoustic Mirror*; in this work Silverman discusses the role of sound in the developing subject’s experience. She then listens to soundtracks of classic cinema for evidence of acoustic inscription in ideological structures. She bases her research on Lacanian applications to music on the work of two (little translated) French theorists, Guy Rosolato and Michel Chion.

²²This word “event” is paradoxical. On the one hand it points to an experience that occurred in the past (it came after one moment, and made possible another—the mirror stage, for example, which came after birth and before the oedipal crisis), and yet it can only be bracketed-off as a moment after the fact within the symbolic order. As such it is only a retrospective reconstruction. Many Lacanian concepts require, therefore, a cutting-against-the-grain approach—the naming of a space between (lost) diachronically experienced “events” and (inescapably) retrospective signs of the symbolic order.

be described using concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis. There is something pre-symbolic about the way in which the double myths cancel each other out, about the way that our associations with the conventional meaning of the musical materials of the opera are systematically affirmed in moments and severed *between* moments. At times the lush orchestration and continuous texture sound seducing; at times the music sounds ominously unmotivated and relentless. Lacan has a name for that which resists symbolization, for that “hard kernel” that cannot be incorporated into social structures or language; it is the Real.²³

Zizak discusses three classic Hollywood films, each of which radically negates one standard aspect of film technique; straining the conventions of film produces, in each case, an image of the Real—that which flows into our consciousness outside of the “normal” imaginary and symbolic structures of film and language. The films are Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake*, Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope*, and Russell Rouse’s *The Thief*.²⁴ Zizak discusses *Rope* as follows:

Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rope* is built on a prohibition of montage. The whole film gives the impression of one long shot; even when a cut is necessary because of technical limitations (in 1948, the longest possible take lasted ten minutes), it is made unobtrusively so as to pass unnoticed (a person passes directly in front of the camera and blackens its whole field for a moment, for example). (*Looking Awry* 41)

And further on: “By means of a prohibition of montage, *Rope* enacts a psychotic *passage à l’acte* (the ‘rope’ from the title of the film is, of course, ultimately the ‘rope’ connecting ‘words’ and ‘acts,’ i.e., it

²³For a clear discussion of the Real in Lacan, see Zizak, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 169-173. See also *Looking Awry*, “From Reality to the Real.”

²⁴I will discuss *Rope* briefly here. For a discussion of what has been “prohibited” in the other films, see Zizak, *Looking Awry*, 39-43.

marks the moment at which the symbolic, so to speak, falls into the real. . .” (42).

Adams represents in music a prohibition of montage, a continuous illusion of a “take”—including breaks between scenes and acts, breaks that are as necessary for an opera production in the late 80s as a cut after ten minutes was for a film maker in the late 40s. Zizak refers to a nightmare of continuity, an incestuous sense of claustrophobia in *Rope* that is produced by an arbitrary prohibition for the sake of formal experimentation. *Nixon in China* shares with *Rope* a sense of relentless motion and unbroken continuity. In his obsessive representation of a musical present, Adams closes-off retention and protention. Conventional representations of meaning require access to the past, to memory, to language. In *Nixon in China* Adams traps us in a narrow acoustic corridor of the Real.

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